

Assembly Elections in Jammu and Kashmir: Explaining the Electoral Success of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)

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Abstract

At the outset, the most significant aspect of the Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir since 2002 was the unexpected and constant response of the electorates to the newly formed Peoples Democratic Party. Its continued success lies in its capability to manage the middle game politics, its image as a pro-separatist and soft-political party. This article will give an overview of the PDP's electoral rise from the last three assembly elections since 2002.

Key Words: *Assembly elections, J&K, Kashmir, PDP*

Introduction

The state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) experienced a wave of fresh air during the September-October 2002 Assembly elections, it was simply a historic, fair and free elections particularly first after the Independence took place in the state. The election results were astonishing, though not quite unexpected. The verdict of the people overthrew the dynastic rule of the dominant National Conference (NC) and paved way for peoples rule by the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In addition, it was rightly termed as 'the return of democracy' in the valley (Kahol 2003). The PDP patron Mufti Mohammad Sayeed took reins of the state government, by replacing Farooq Abdullah and disappointing young Omar Abdullah. The loss of NC appeared to be the gain of PDP; it seemed to be so simple. In other words, the voter clearly disapproved of NC's opportunistic attitude and lust for power.

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Elections have become the lodestar of progress, an interesting twist given the long history of electoral irregularities in the state, most notably in 1987. Delhi has carefully coordinated with both the NC and PDP in intricate coalitions and local seat-sharing deals after state elections in 1996, 2002, and 2008 (Staniland 2013). Elections are the ultimate harbinger of normalcy for the pundit and political class that deals with Kashmir: turnout numbers are eagerly seized on as evidence of acceptance, legitimacy, and pro-India sentiment. Much has also been made of state initiatives to provide employment and public works projects. A variety of institutions take part in this particular brand of winning hearts and minds, ranging from army-sponsored outings for children to highway construction contracts to educational schemes.

The United States also welcomed the successful October conclusion of 2002 state assembly elections in the Indian state of J&K, where nearly half of the electorate cast ballots. The previous polls, held in 1996, were marked by widespread violence, low turnout, and charges of rampant rigging and fraud. Thus the Ninth J&K Assembly election was held in four phases in September-October, 2002, are quadrangle in the electoral muse. Of course, we can claim that it is the first-ever electoral exercise which in the real sense can be deemed transparent one (Ghauhar 2002).

Middle Game Politics

With the emergence of PDP in the late nineties, the context of the power politics changed drastically in the state. PDP as another Kashmir-based regional political party has not only challenged the dominance of the NC but also changed the whole scenario of power politics in the region. Adopting a political discourse that reflected the popular concerns of people in a situation of conflict, PDP sought to reduce the gap between popular aspirations and power politics. It borrowed issues from the separatist camps and brought them to the Centre of mainstream political space (Chowdhary and Rao 2004). Many of the issues raised by the PDP are those, which earlier formed the exclusive agenda of separatists. PDP suggested 'dialogue' with the militants and separatists as a way towards solving the long-standing imbroglio, easing out pressure upon people from the excessive presence of the security forces, and reducing drastically the number of cases of human rights violations. The release of political prisoners and an end to the abuse of emergency regulations would be an especially important confidence-building measure taken by this party (Bose 2003).

It had also favored the release of militants and as a middle path agreed with the Congress for "screening" that might lead to freedom for youth held in minor cases. The Common Minimum Programme between PDP and Congress also includes a promise "to encourage militants to rejoin the mainstream and ensure justice according to law." The state government would cooperate with the Centre in its attempts to restore normalcy in the militancy torn state (The Hindustan Times 2002). PDP takes a different path as compared to other mainstream and separatist parties. The NC and Congress are branded as pro-Indian parties and separatists as pro-Pakistani parties or front. PDP avoids these two extremes and take a middle path (middle of the road approach), means it neither branded themselves as the pro-Indian or pro-Pakistani, but takes a different path on the plank of Self-rule and defined its honorable relation with both India and Pakistan at the same time and demands self-rule for the state from both the countries.

Therefore, it keeps the sentiments of both Kashmiri people as well as of the two nations without aligning with anyone. On the political front, PDP was successful in roping in the political dissidents at sub-regional levels, who had not been given any political space during NC tenures that helps them at the end. Apart from this, it gives people a choice to avoid two extremes and gives them the third option of middle path politics. It was this 'people-oriented' strategy of PDP that helped end the hegemony of NC in 2002.

Performance of PDP in Assembly Elections

The 2002 Assembly election in the state of J&K was sharply a contested one. As this was the first that the ruling party was facing a challenge in the valley by a regional political party called the PDP. The intensity of the competition was not limited to the competition between the NC and the PDP in the valley but also involved other parties and candidates (Chowdhary 2007). This election also saw a higher number of contestants, more vigorous campaigning and more intensified violence. The PDP consciously carved itself as a regional political party and having a strong base in the Kashmir region. The party was organized in the Kashmir region particularly with a view to keen competition for the dominant NC. It refused to have an alliance with the national parties even when the congress and the CPM proposed an alliance (Chowdhary 2007). It believed that the sharing of seats with other parties whether national or regional would have diluted the very nature of competition with the NC. As it decided to contest the 2002 Assembly election on its own paid the PDP in terms of electoral

success and resulted in the changing character of electoral politics in the Valley. The party was managed to win 16 seats and a vote share of 9.04 percent see Table 1. During the 2002 Assembly elections, the PDP managed to capture as many as 16 seats (out of 87) all from Kashmir Valley.

Table1
State-Level Performance of PDP

Assembly Elections	Number of Seats	Vote Share (%)
2002	16	9.04
2008	21	15.39
2014	28	22.7

Source: Election Commission of India.

In the 2008 Assembly election, it increased its tally from 16 to 21 and managed to win two seats in the Jammu region. Although PDP remains the second-largest party in the 2008 Assembly elections but failed to make an alliance with Congress. NC could not maintain the majority still it could maintain its lead in the Assembly. Although NC secured the same number of seats as in the last election, the tally of Congress was decreased to 17 in 2008 from 20 in 2002. In terms of its votes, PDPs share increased from 09.04 percent in 2002 elections to 15.39 percent in the 2008 Assembly elections. NC vote share was decreased from 28.23 percent to 23.07 percent in 2008, and Congress vote share was decreased from 21.38 percent to 17.71 percent in 2008. In the election PDP increased its strength to 21 remains the second-largest party in the state after NC. It lost its two seats they won in the last election that is Gander bal constituency to Omar Abdullah and Noorabad Constituency to Sakinaltoo, both of NC. However, PDP won the other eight seats and increased the number to 21. The new constituencies they won are Lolab, Bandipora, Pattan, Tral, Wachi, Anantnag, Darhal and Mendhar. Out of these eight constituencies, five were of NC in the last election. The PDP's great success in this election was that it extends its arm outside the Kashmir region and won two seats in the Jammu region that is Dharhal and Mendhar seat. In the 2014 Assembly election, PDP managed to get 28 seats and emerged as the largest party both at the level of the state and even at the level of the Kashmir region, yet it failed to cross the halfway mark.

Table 2.
Performance of PDP in Kashmir Region

Year	Number of Seats (Total Seats 46)	Vote Share (%)
2002	16	24.51
2008	19	27.41
2014	25	37.30

Source: Election Commission of India.

For the PDP, the 2014 assembly election marks a very significant moment. The party that has come into existence only one-and-a-half decades back has emerged as the largest party in terms of seats during the election. The party during the 2002 election was able to win 16 seats and around 24.51 percent vote share and has increased its tally to 19 seats and 27.51 percent votes in 2008 (see Table 2). In 2014, the party was able to win 25 seats and 37.30 percent votes and emerged as the largest party in the Kashmir region in terms of both seats and votes. The fragmentation of the electoral space of the Kashmir region was the distinctiveness of these three elections.

Table 3.
Performance of PDP in Jammu and Ladakh Regions

Year	Jammu		Ladakh	
	Number of Seats (Total Seats 37)	Vote Share (%)	Number of Seats (Total Seats 4)	Vote Share (%)
2002	0	1.77	0	-
2008	2	6.88	0	0.54
2014	3	10.99	0	11.77

Source: Election Commission of India.

Although, predominantly a Kashmir based party, the PDP started shifting its political strategies in the post-2008 period. Understanding the limitations of the region-specific agenda in the context of highly competitive electoral space in the Kashmir region, PDP sought to redefine itself as an all-state party and extend its base in Jammu and Ladakh region. In the 2002 Assembly election, PDP was unable to open its account in the Jammu region. However,

in 2008 it was able to create a space for itself with the Muslim majority parts of the Jammu region. In 2008, the PDP was able to win two seats in the predominantly Muslim constituencies of Mendhar and Darhal in the Poonch-Rajouri belt of Jammu region (Chowdhary 2015). In the 2014 Assembly election, the party succeeded in winning three seats from the same belt(see Table 3). The party was able to increase its vote share from 1.77 percent in 2002 and 6.89 percent in 2008 to 11 percent in 2014. In the Ladakh region, PDP had no base till 2008 and even in the 2014 Assembly election it failed to open its account but was able to increase its vote share from 0.54 percent in 2008 to 11.77 percent in 2014.

Conclusion

The PDPs people-oriented strategy brought down the one-party dominance and political hegemony of the NC in 2002. The constant alienation of people and denial of the democratic rights to change elect and oppose during the NCs hegemonic rule was one of a significant reason for the emergence and rise of PDP in the state. The people of J&K give strong support to PDP and rejects NC in all the three assembly elections particularly in the Kashmir valley. The party was able to form the power-sharing governments on two occasions – shared power with Congress in 2002 and BJP in 2014. The major trends since 2002 are the relative decline of the NC and Congress while PDP is on the rise. The party was able to increase its seat and vote share since 2002 because of following its middle path approach as it avoids the two extreme paths of being a pro-Indian or pro-Pakistani party. It was able to keep the sentiments of both Kashmiri people as well as of the two nations without aligning with anyone.

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